Nicaragua and the Battle over Memory and History

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The memory and history of the 1979-1990 Sandinista Revolution has never been as important as now. It is at the heart of the crisis that has gripped the country since April, when Nicaraguans rose in opposition to President Daniel Ortega and the Vice-President, his wife Rosario Murillo. The presidential couple claim the movement is an US-orchestrated, right wing coup attempt, which they have successfully averted. Many self-described leftists in the US agree with them, referring to anyone who criticizes Ortega and stands in support of the Nicaraguans in opposition to Ortega as stooges of US imperialism. Social media, as important in this case as it was in the “Arab spring,” amplifies the aggressive tone of the political moment, although historically, that is well within Nicaraguan political culture, previously reserved for *La Prensa* and *Novedades* under Somoza and then *La Prensa* and *Barricada* during the Sandinista Revolution.

Those involved in continuous protest since April, however, see themselves differently: they marched first against austerity measures, then against the disproportionate repression the regime unleashed against them and in favor of moving elections up from 2021, among other issues. Those protesting comprise a broad sector of the Nicaraguan population, from the right and the left, including many Sandinistas who accuse Ortega of tyranny and representing a “deformed” version of Sandinismo. One of the common slogans of the movement is “Ortega y Somoza son la misma cosa” (“Ortega and Somoza are the same thing”) showing that on many levels the battle for Nicaragua today is a battle over the memory and history of the Sandinista Revolution.

The Sandinista Revolution, 1979-1990

You will recall that the Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional struggled for decades to overthrow the last of three Somoza patriarchs in power since the US Marines left the country in
the 1930s, after several years of guerrilla attacks led by Augusto Cesar Sandino. The FSLN finally succeeded in overthrowing Somoza in 1979, after multiple insurrections throughout that year. The FSLN, a military organization which saw itself as a vanguard party with plural leadership and important support among sectors of the country’s upper class ruled for a decade, until 1990. Daniel Ortega was president during that time (1985-1990), but the revolution was under siege from the Reagan administration, which funded a counterrevolutionary army that pretty much destroyed the country. In 1990, the FSLN lost elections to a right-wing coalition organized and funded by the US. Sixteen years of radical neoliberalism followed.

The Neoliberal Backlash (1990-2006) and the FSLN

In those sixteen years the basis that has brought Nicaragua to the point of insurrection again in 2018 took shape. Successive neoliberal governments and unparalleled corruption sunk Nicaragua into poverty on the par with Honduras, with 44% of the population living on less than a dollar a day by 1998.1 At the same time, those years utterly transformed or “decomposed,” in the words of Vilma Nuñez de Escorcia, the FSLN.2 The organization was torn apart first by the infamous piñata, whereby what had been state property under the Sandinista Revolution became the private property of many in the leadership, including the Ortega family. In 1994 a layer of the “historic leadership” of the revolution left the party, defeated in its attempts to democratize the internal workings of the FSLN. They formed the Movimiento de Renovación Sandinista (MRS), now accused by Ortega-Murillo of being the right-wing faction behind the “coup

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1Katherine Hoyt, “Parties and Pacts in Contemporary Nicaragua,” Unpublished Paper presented at the Latin American Studies Association Conference, Washington, DC, September 6-8, 2001. [http://lasa.international.pitt.edu/Lasa2001/HoytKatherine.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0jFenjIV-g3v0KHeC0k2ANOP6BU0GNIWzylWfz8aLz72e8G_y2GNYsQ_p.6](http://lasa.international.pitt.edu/Lasa2001/HoytKatherine.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0jFenjIV-g3v0KHeC0k2ANOP6BU0GNIWzylWfz8aLz72e8G_y2GNYsQ_p.6)

attempt” against him. The discontent increased when Ortega ran for president in 1996 and his step-daughter, Zoilamérica Narváez revealed that her stepfather had sexually assaulted since she was 11 years old and for the next 20 years. While Ortega did not deny the accusations, Rosario Murillo came to her husband’s defense, calling her daughter a liar before a national audience. Nicaraguan feminists, finally freed from party structures that had kept a lid on their movement throughout the years of the Sandinista Revolution, did their best to hold Ortega accountable but failed. Their defiance, however, was not forgotten by the Ortega-Murillo couple. Other groups of Sandinistas tried to reform the party and lead it toward internal democracy, as well, without success. The MRS was the best known, but it was not the only one (others included groups such as: Izquierda del FSLN, Iniciativa Sandinista, Sandinistas por la Dignidad, Foro Sandinista). The cumulative effects of emotional and political losses, the gutting of the economy by neo-liberal policies, and the rampant corruption by the likes of President Arnoldo Alemán, meant that the FSLN became but a shell of its former self, a shell Ortega grew into as personal armor. The once revolutionary party became the dominion of one man, the vehicle of one man in his continued search for power. Ortega lost elections twice more, winning 38-40% of the vote, a respectable percentage. Many Nicaraguans still saw him as a revolutionary figure, especially the poor who grew exponentially as a result of neoliberalism. Other Sandinista rank-and-file

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3Ibid.

unhappy with the direction of the party nevertheless held their noses and voted for Ortega because they would never vote for any candidate who was not Sandinista.\textsuperscript{5}

In August 1999 then President Arnaldo Aleman and Daniel Ortega signed an Acuerdo de gobernabilidad, an agreement on bipartisanship that reminded Nicaraguans of previous infamous political pacts. Sandino had rebelled in part in reaction to one such pact in the 1920s, while other sectors of Nicaraguan society repudiated the pacts various parties had signed with Somoza to win their “\textit{cuota de poder}” (power quota).\textsuperscript{6} Aleman and Ortega agreed to a series of Constitutional amendments and changes to the electoral laws that, among other things, granted each other seats in the National Assembly (and with that, the parliamentary immunity that they bought sought: Aleman for corruption and Ortega for sexual assault), and lowered the percentage needed to win the presidency. Thereafter whichever candidate won 35\% of the popular vote in the first round became president without having to go to a second round.\textsuperscript{7} FSLN members criticized the pact mercilessly as taking the country historically to \textit{Somocismo}, accusing Ortega of “kidnapping” the party to satisfy his own political ambitions, eliminating all traces of revolutionary praxis.\textsuperscript{8} Ortega’s response was to threaten and condemn those party members who questioned his decision-making and failed to demonstrate the required party discipline. According to some academics, the pact, in essence, promised a two-party system, but closed the political system to any party other than the FSLN and the PLC.\textsuperscript{9} In any case, the FSLN was becoming less and less

\textsuperscript{5} Personal Interview, Managua, Nicaragua 2017

\textsuperscript{6} Hoyt, p. 21

\textsuperscript{7}Enrique Bolaños, “El Pacto: Satisfacer ambiciones?” (http://www.enriquebolanos.org/articulo/08_auge_caida_plc_pacto_satisfacer_ambiciones)

\textsuperscript{8}Hoyt, p. 19

\textsuperscript{9}Hoyt, p. 21
Sandinista and more and more “Danielista.” Ortega won presidential elections during his third try, in 2006, with 38.7% of the vote, just a few points above the threshold established by the pacto.\textsuperscript{10} He has been president ever since, changing the Nicaraguan constitution along the way to extend reelection beyond two terms (presidential terms being 5 years). Elected in 2016, his current term expires in 2021.

\textbf{Daniel Ortega in Power, 2006-present}

\textit{Politics}

Upon becoming president again, Ortega seemed to apply certain lessons he felt he learned from his years as president of a revolutionary government and the years of neoliberalism. He presented himself as the embodiment of another phase of the revolution to the Nicaraguan people and, as such, his primary goal was to remain in power to enact a revolutionary agenda. But, as he told the National Assembly in 2008, he was a changed man, one with “un corazón de izquierda justiciero, y una cabeza de derecha responsable” (“the heart of a leftist social justice warrior and the head of a responsible rightist”).\textsuperscript{11} What that meant in the practice was making deals with the right and disallowing criticism from the left. The feminist movement came under direct attack, for example, outlawing abortion under any circumstance and closing their political space by labeling them as enemies of the Nicaraguan family. NGOs with a social justice bent came under scrutiny, losing access to funding if they criticized the government.\textsuperscript{12} Individuals

\textsuperscript{10}Puíg, “El regimen patriomonial,” p. 311.


\textsuperscript{12}“Primeros partos del pacto,” \textit{Envío}, Número 216, March 2000, \url{http://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/992}
who did not demonstrate loyalty to Ortega lost access or their jobs, including men who had been high level Sandinistas during the 1980s.

The church, a bitter enemy of the Sandinista Revolution in the 1980s, now became an ally. Ortega and Murillo declared themselves Christians, got married in church, and cozied up to their historical foe, the Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo, who sought and won a complete ban on abortion in exchange for keeping secret the rumor that Obando y Bravo had fathered a child.¹³

Likewise, Ortega set about to gain control over all state institutions, staffing them with personnel loyal to him personally. That included the army, the FSLN representatives in the National Assembly, the Electoral Council, the Supreme Court, and all the ministries.¹⁴ Quite conscious of the role that media play in managing and determining perspective and winning elections, the Ortega family began accumulating media, both radio and television. Some sources say they control eight radio stations and three TV stations, all administered by the Ortega Murillo children.¹⁵ And despite the pacto with the PLC, opposition parties became anachronistic, non-functional, and patently obsolete.¹⁶ Systemically, Ortega has accumulated as much power as the last Somoza, creating what one political scientist calls patrimonialismo autoritario, a repetition of Nicaraguan history indeed.¹⁷

¹³Personal interview, Managua, Nicaragua, 2017
¹⁴Martí i Puig, “El régimen patrimonial,” p. 303
¹⁵Martí i Puig, “El régimen patrimonial,” p. 316
¹⁷Martí i Puig, “El régimen patrimonial,” p. 303
In economic terms, the private sector and Ortega’s government benefited, ironically enough, from the “pink tide” in Latin America. This is what Ortega must mean by having the heart of a social justice warrior and the head of a responsible rightist. By attaching himself to the Pink Tide, Ortega did two things. One, he maintained an anti-imperialist discourse that kept his personality linked to the memory of the Sandinista Revolution without touching the neoliberal economic model of the 16 years before he returned to power. And two, as a member of the Alternativa Bolivariana para América Latina y el Caribe (ALBA), he provided a market for Nicaragua’s private sector, historically suspicious of him because they, too, believed he was the revolutionary of the 1980s; and, he gained access to a slush fund provided by the Venezuelan government directly to him (according to the US embassy, Nicaragua has received a total of 4 billion dollars in aid from Venezuela since 2007). That arrangement made the Nicaraguan private sector happy. They exported meat, sugar, and other agricultural products to Venezuela, up to $438 million dollars’ worth by 2012. The economy grew, employment went up (though not necessarily wages), and not one Nicaraguan capitalist complained to the US embassy about Ortega, despite being reelected twice or, alternatively, allowing him to be elected three times. As long as the economy was humming for the Nicaraguan upper class, the private sector was fine with leaving the politics to Ortega.

The Venezuela funding that he controlled directly, was key to maintaining the idea of Ortega as the revolutionary leader from the 1980s. Ortega used that funding for social programs without needing to challenge structural inequalities or property relations. Thus Nicaragua

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18Baumeister and Martí Puig, “Nicaragua,” p. 303
established its own version of Brazil’s “zero fome” program, “Hambre Cero.” That was followed by “Usura Cero,” “Plan Techo,” “Merienda Escolar,” “Bono Productivo,” and “Casas para el Pueblo.” All of those programs fit within the new Ortega-Murillo slogan of forging a Nicaragua that is “Cristiana, socialista, y solidaria.” They made Ortega popular among the poor, those who had been hardest hit by neoliberalism, and helped him maintain a revolutionary persona and claims to continuity with the Sandinista Revolution without touching the neoliberal economic model. Controlling so many media sources ensured that all images of Ortega would evoke memories of revolutionary times as well.

Critics pointed out, however, that this was no new phase of the Sandinista Revolution. Rather, Ortega was creating a system of clientelism reminiscent of Latin American caudillo politics of the nineteenth century. Only people who belonged to organizations controlled by Ortega’s FSLN, some, like the Consejos del Poder Ciudadano patterned on the Comités de Defensa Sandinista from the 1980s, directly managed by Rosario Murillo, were eligible for benefits. At the same time, a new generation of young people who knew the history of the Sandinista revolution and grew up under neoliberalism and its disastrous effects on most Nicaraguans populated a new Juventud Sandinista, eager to play their role in this “third phase” of the revolution. Sandinistas of the original JS, however, argue that this generation knows nothing of the mistica that characterized los muchachos of the late 1970s and the 1980s, when self-sacrifice and service to the Nicaraguan people was a 24/7 occupation. According to them,

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20 Personal Interview, Managua, Nicaragua 2017
today’s Juventud is more akin to a cheerleading squad for Ortega—or fuerzas de choque, since April.

Overall, the Pink Tide served Nicaragua’s economy well. The country achieved growth rates of 5% per year and cut poverty rates by half (from 48% in 2005 to 25% in 2016).²¹ Ortega knew, nevertheless, that his government, if he or Rosario Murillo were to remain in power for another generation, as it was rumored was the plan, needed its own sources of income.

*The canal project*

That was the point of the June 2013 law (840) that allowed foreign investors, in this case a Chinese company, the Hong Kong Nicaragua Canal Development, to carve out a canal through Nicaragua—an idea that goes back to the dawn of the twentieth century, when the US corps of engineers mapped out the entire route, but never built it. The protests that followed the 2013 law and the government’s response, in many ways, pre-figured the 2018 crisis. The law allowed not only the digging out of a canal, but also allied projects: an airport, the two ports at each end of the canal, a railroad, and two free-trade zones (zonas francas, where labor and environmental laws do not apply, giving capital free reign), and leaving the door open to further economic development. The plans affected somewhere between 60,000 – 120,000 people (out of 6 million total population), none of whom were consulted, of course. As a result, at least 48 different local and five national protests ensued. Campesinos, indigenous folks, and environmentalists led the organized opposition, and the government responded with tear gas, detentions, repression and

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violence, including the use of paramilitary forces to attack protesters and leave them wounded. Promises of land and relocation were not enough to stem the protests, which ended quietly in 2016 when the project was abandoned as a result of the downtown in the Chinese economy. The effective end of the project meant that the regime failed in its efforts to develop a local source of state income via tariffs and permits.

Anti-canal protest, 2014

Challenging “Orteguismo”

Just as important is the fact that for some sectors of the population the way the government repressed the protests unmasked Ortega’s pretense to revolutionary politics. But not everyone was convinced that Ortega was, indeed, no revolutionary. Vilma Nuñez de Escorcia,

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the president of the Centro Nicaragüense de Derechos Humanos, a Sandinista *de segunda promoción*, Vice-President of the Supreme Court under the Sandinista Revolution, who ran for President against Daniel Ortega in 1996 from within the FSLN, and since 2006 has become one of Ortega’s most vocal critics, expressed her frustration with Nicaraguans and foreigners who did not believe her. In January 2016, she told me, “esta gente quiere ver sangre por las calles para creer que el gobierno viola los derechos humanos” (“these people want to see blood running down the street to believe that the government violates human rights”). I have been thinking about those words since April, when the blood, indeed, began running down the streets.

The collapse of the Venezuelan economy affected Ortega’s government in profound ways, as evidenced by the immediate cause of the April protests, the cuts to social security. But the protests are not fundamentally economic. They are political.

*Who are the protesters and why do they protest?*

Who is protesting and what do they want? As we know, events unfolded very quickly in the first massive challenge to what opponents of the regime are calling “Orteguismo” in an effort to claim ownership of Sandinismo and distinguish today’s Ortega from his historical role in Sandinista Revolution. Ortega announced reforms to social security, which generated protest from those affected but even that was met with enough repression from the state to generate a second, mass protest led by students on April 18. The government shot live ammunition into the crowd, on this occasion killing about 14 people, injuring more—an escalation from what Ortega had done already during the canal protests. In the melee at the back of the march, young men with their own version of revolutionary dreaming killed a policeman. It was the government’s display of unprecedented repressive force that shocked the nation. It took them back to the excesses of Somoza, “when it was a crime to be young,” as Nicaraguans like to say. Massive
demonstrations in the hundreds of thousands followed all over the country, calling for the resignation of “the dictator,” a blunt reference to pre-1979 history. The demonstrators came from all walks of life, but obviously the overwhelming majority were poor people—because the overwhelming majority of Nicaraguans are poor people, although there was representation from wealthier sectors of society, and members of the “historical leadership” of the FSLN.23

Next thing you know, the students took over the universities as other sectors set up barricades everywhere from Managua to the Costa Rican border, taking a page straight out of the 1979 insurrections. Deriding the protests at first, Ortega and Murillo shifted gears and called for a dialogue. With the Church as mediator, the talks included students and the private sector in recognition of the fact that the opposition covered a wide ideological spectrum, a situation not unlike the one that Somoza faced in his final years. The dialogue went nowhere, however, as the private sector abandoned Ortega and the Church and the students demanded his resignation. The protests multiplied all over the country; a national strike paralyzed the country’s economy—an unmistakable sign that the private sector would not defend Ortega. The violence escalated, as paramilitary bodies attacked opposition protesters, the universities, and the barricades. Young men went on the offensive. Some were openly re-enacting 1979, utilizing symbols from the insurrection—including Susan Meiselas’ “Molotov man” on t-shirts and Leonel Rugama’s cry “que se rinda tu madre” (“let your mother surrender”) on numerous homemade signs—using firecracker mortars, and, in Masaya and Jinotepe openly challenging paramilitaries and the police. In Monimbo and Masaya the confrontation became insurrectional, just as it had in 1979.

Without ever admitting that the government was responsible for the initial repression, Ortega sought to discredit protesters by allowing the human rights commission of the UN to investigate the situation in Nicaragua, but as the numbers of dead increased and the commission found that it was the government doing the killing (at last count some 400 dead, 21 of them policemen), Ortega threw the commission out of the country.\(^{24}\)

The presidential couple went on a media offensive, denying any responsibility for the bloodshed and blaming the violence on the protesters who, according to Ortega, were being manipulated by the CIA without even realizing it. That has been official discourse since: there is no opposition, there was a coup attempt carried out by the right wing, orchestrated from

Washington. That position has been defended by some groups and individuals in the US who were sympathetic to the Sandinista Revolution of the 1980s and who believe that Ortega still represents the revolutionary flame within Nicaragua and a genuine anti-imperialist position. Ironically enough, the right wing of the opposition, including the US government, agrees with that interpretation, seeing the presidential couple as communist puppets of Maduro and Cuba who ruined the country. The heated Cold War rhetoric of the 1980s, thus, is also alive and well in Nicaragua and among right wing Nicaraguans who live in the US. To what degree those groups are operating on the ground and among the protestors in Nicaragua is hard to say, but their presence in social media is prominent.

Those who defend Ortega from an anti-imperialist perspective, reliving the Cold War and the Contra war, share something else with the revived Cold War warriors: they both demonstrate a remarkable ignorance of Nicaraguan history. Let us remember that there was a reason why Gabriela Mistral called Sandino’s army *el pequeño ejército loco*—because Sandino and a handful of men really did expect to defeat the US Marines. As, in fact, they did. Let us remember that it was a lone young poet, Rigoberto López Pérez, who killed Anastasio Somoza in 1956; and that a group of young rich conservatives led by Pedro Joaquín Chamorro invaded Nicaragua from Costa Rica three years later, in 1959, attempting to overthrow Luis Somoza, but failed and ended up in jail for it. The FSLN itself was down to a handful of guerrillas when the National Guard killed Carlos Fonseca Amador in 1976, and yet, three years later, the Frente was in power. All that to say that as Nicaraguans like to say, *los nicas son arrechos*. They do not need the CIA to identify authoritarians, to organize against them, and to try to get rid of them.
What does the opposition want?

Given the diversity of the opposition and their lived historical experience, it should be no surprise that it has taken a while for the protesters to come up with a plan, a program, or even a set of demands. The students, in very similar fashion to sectors of the Arab spring or even Occupy in the US, were adamant about not wanting a party or any other traditional form of political organization to lead them. Not until October 4, did a formal “Manifiesto de Unidad Nacional Azul y Blanco” come out as an official statement from an opposition coalition comprised of 43 different civil society organizations (students, peasants, human rights activists, private sector, feminists, environmentalists, and individual political figures), including the Civic Alliance for Justice and Democracy (the group that improvised for the now defunct national dialogue). The manifesto lists 10 principles and values, 10 urgent demands, and 13 commitments. One immediate demand is the removal of the presidential couple through a “democratic transition” and early elections at the national, regional, and municipal levels, with the ultimate goal of “the establishment of democracy,” which, as we know, was truly a historical achievement of the 1990 election that unseated the FSLN. Other demands include: the immediate end to repression, freedom for political prisoners, freedom of association, freedom of expression, the end to reprisals against state workers who support the opposition, respect for human rights, and the familiar package of Liberal freedoms that have been around since the Enlightenment.

What is Ortega doing now

The mass protests have given way to small demonstrations nearly every day, but the space for critique is extremely constrained.\(^\text{26}\) The presidential couple is coming down hard, but legally, on the population given their control of the National Assembly and other institutions, passing a draconian “anti-terrorism” law that brings under scrutiny everyone, including the finances of the private sector and NGOs, threatening to bring charges against them if they support opposition activity.\(^\text{27}\) They have also passed new laws to regulate, contain, and make illegal anti-government demonstrations, policies that are inevitably reminiscent of Somoza’s approach to opposition.\(^\text{28}\) Foreigners have been advised to avoid criticism of state under penalty of deportation, including those who became naturalized as Nicaraguan citizens during the Sandinista Revolution. Opposition figures, primarily those who lay claim to Sandinismo, nevertheless argue that Ortega has lost legitimacy, that he has lost the trust of the population, that he is “strategically defeated,” as Humberto Ortega said about the contra before the peace talks at Sapoá in 1989, and it is only a matter of time before he is out of power. Again, this group is looking to the patterns of Nicaraguan history. Somoza did not go into exile at the first attack carried out by the FSLN. It took time, but in 1979, he finally left.

\(^{26}\)Will Grant, “Why Speaking Out in Nicaragua is Getting Tough,” BBC News, October 21, 2018

\(^{27}\)http://www.uaf.gob.ni/images/Pdf/Decretos/REGLAMENTOS_LEYES_976_Y_977_.GACETA_No_19.PDF

\(^{28}\)“Preocupa decisión de la policía de Nicaragua que declara ilegales protestas ciudadanas,” Iberoamérica Central de Noticias, October 14, 2018, https://www.icendiario.com/2018/10/14/preocupa-decision-de-la-policia-de-nicaragua-que-declara-ilegales-protestas-de-los-ciudadanos/?fbclid=IwAR2qHTooS_9Pb-BSRtIsXZ947RqvFPhtI6jEh2rl_Vy3frtAqH2JDzljTRk
The role of the United States

There is a saying in Spanish, *a río revuelto, ganancia de pescadores*. There is no question that there are shadowy forces involved in the opposition against Ortega-Murillo. The US government is undoubtedly one of them. Between 1990 and 2006, the usual US agencies were active in Nicaragua: US-AID, NED, CIA, all claiming to be building democracy. Since Ortega has been president, however, there has been surprisingly little activity against him in US government circles. The Nicaraguan Investment Conditionality Act (NICA-Act), a piece of legislature that conditions foreign aid to Nicaragua taken right out of the Cold War was not approved by the House of Representatives until 2016, testament to how pleased the private sector was with Ortega for a whole decade. Further proof of that, in fact, is that the bill died in the US Senate altogether. It was not reactivated until September, 2018, in light of the current crisis, which caught the US by surprise, just as it did Ortega and Murillo.\(^{29}\) Representatives Marco Rubio, Ted Cruz and Ileana Ros Lehtinen were quick to make hay of the situation, nevertheless, meeting with three Nicaraguan university students who traveled to the US in June seeking aid for their cause,\(^ {30}\) a trip that other students considered ill-advised and one of the risks of a leaderless movement. It will be a while, however, until evidence of US intervention comes to light. What is clear, however, is that this opposition movement is homegrown, massive, and fully preceded in Nicaraguan history. Where it will go is difficult to predict right at the moment,


but no Nicaraguan, from the right or the left, and much less those who would wrestle the history and meaning of Sandinismo from Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo, are about to surrender.

In light of that reality, what Americans ought to do is to follow the example the Nicaraguan people are setting for us and recover another piece of history: the Hands-off Nicaragua movement, whose proud membership included Mark Twain. Or, if you like, the solidarity with the people of Nicaragua movement because it should be, as it will be, the Nicaraguans who decide what to do about their government.